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USSR: Possible Military Manpower CutsSummary

[redacted] the Soviets may soon
 announce reductions in military manpower. [redacted]
 [redacted] probably have been prompted
 by Gorbachev's proposal for mutual reductions "from the Atlantic to the
 Urals" and the allusion in his Vladivostok speech to a possible
 reduction of Soviet forces in Mongolia. [redacted]

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Although the Soviets would doubtless seek to portray any unilateral
 cutback as a "peace initiative," we judge the real cause would be the
 adverse demographic trends in the USSR. Since 1978 there has been a
 sharp decline in the number of 18-year-old males, and recovery to the
 mid-1970s level is not expected to occur until the end of the 1990s.
 The military has had to make several adjustments to its conscription and
 general personnel policies in recent years in an effort to maintain the
 active-duty strength of the armed forces. This has added to the
 pressure on an already stretched labor pool. The Soviet political
 leadership, whose immediate priority is the domestic economy, has
 probably become dissatisfied with the military's efforts to claim what
 in effect is an increasing proportion of a shrinking pool. Under such
 circumstances, even if cutbacks are not specifically ordered, the
 military would have to find ways to accommodate a reduction in
 manpower. [redacted]

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The demographic situation does not require cutbacks so drastic as
 to reduce substantially the general readiness level of the USSR's armed
 forces. While we cannot rule out such cuts, the military clearly would
 resist strongly, and we doubt that the political leadership would force
 anything radical. Reductions of up to a few hundred thousand might be
 accommodated, however, and while they would not relieve the overall
 labor force problems, they could have an important effect at the margin,

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 [redacted]

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particular in certain areas such as the USSR's western industrial heartland. Whatever their size, Moscow would certainly seek to exploit the potential benefits of such cuts in terms of impact on world opinion. The Soviets might open with an announcement of small, token cuts to be taken unilaterally from Central Europe or Mongolia and at the same time call for larger, mutual cuts by NATO and the Warsaw Pact and, perhaps, by China. [REDACTED]

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The Evidence

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[REDACTED] these cuts would take place over a period of three to six months, would focus on military personnel nearing retirement age or in ill health, and in the Soviet case would be drawn from ground forces stationed in the USSR. The exact base to which the 15 to 20 percent would be applied was ambiguous, but a literal interpretation [REDACTED]

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[redacted]
[redacted] recent public pronouncements by General Secretary Gorbachev and other Warsaw Pact leaders about possible troop cutbacks:

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- In early June, Warsaw Pact leaders issued an appeal to NATO to join the Pact in reducing conventional and nuclear forces--both troops and weapons--in Europe from the Urals to the Atlantic. The appeal follows statements by Gorbachev in April that called for initial reductions of 100,000 to 150,000 troops by each side. Further cuts, to be completed by the early 1990s, would result in overall reductions of about 25 percent (more than 500,000 men) from each side's present force level.
- In his 28 July Vladivostok speech Gorbachev announced that the withdrawal of a "considerable number" of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and the Far East is now being examined. This follows numerous other public statements by Gorbachev in which he has called for improving relations with China. Even an essentially symbolic reduction of Soviet forces in this region could be seen in Beijing as reducing one of the three "obstacles" to improved relations the Chinese have cited. [redacted]

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Demographic Concerns

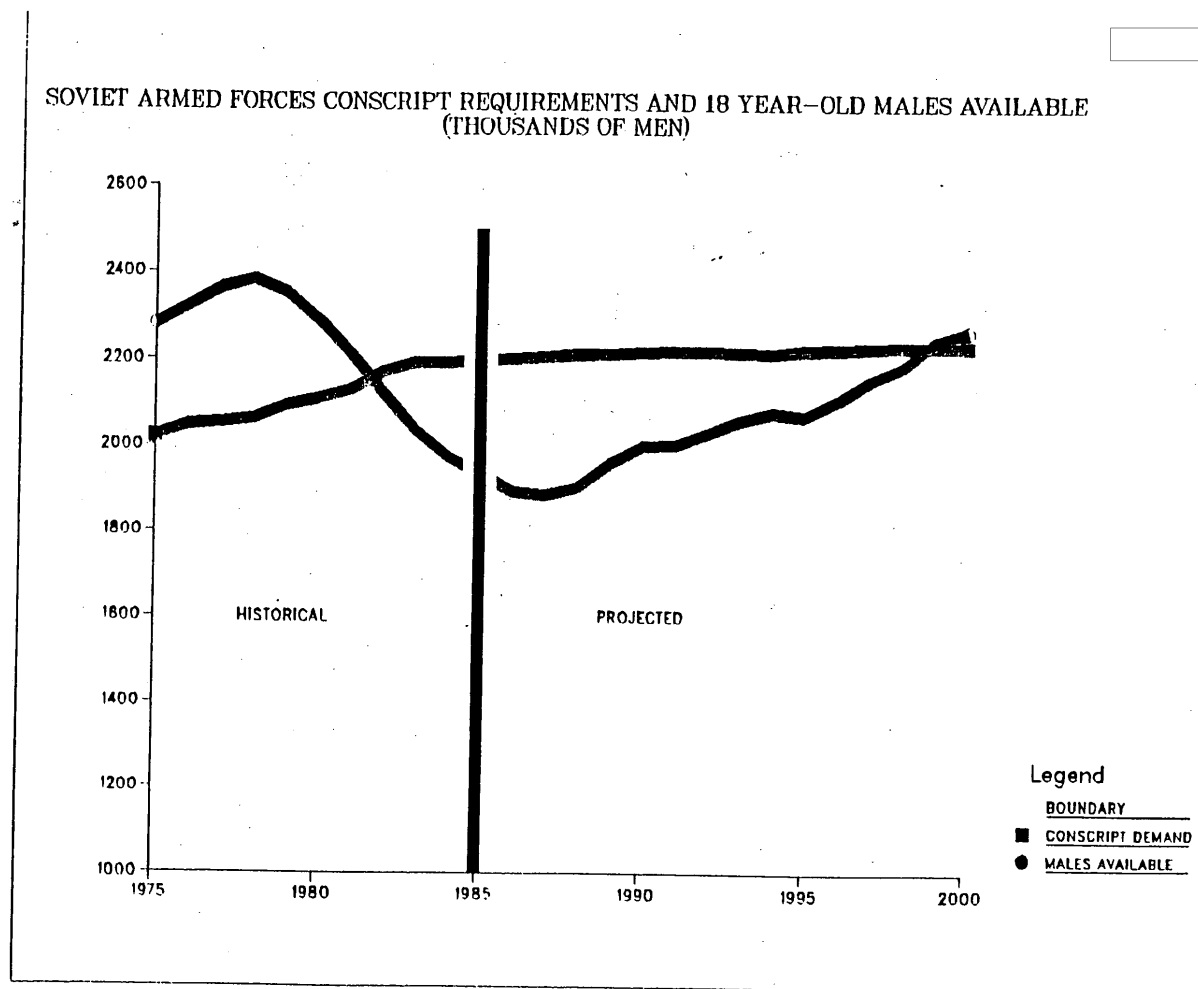
Primarily because of demographic distortions created during World War II, the USSR has been experiencing a decline in the number of 18-year-old males since the mid-1970s that has led to increased competition for manpower between the civilian labor force and the military forces. The number of males reaching 18 in 1986 is only about three-fourths of the 1978 postwar peak, and there is no quick recovery in prospect (see figure 1). Although the pool of 18-year-old males will begin to increase after this year, it will remain too small to meet the conscription demand until the late 1990s. In fact, since 1980, the Soviets have had to initiate increasingly stringent draft policies to maintain the existing size of the armed forces, which we estimate at 5.5 million. They have:

- Virtually eliminated educational deferments.
- Toughened standards for medical exclusions.
- Conscripted men up to age 26 who had not been inducted earlier.
- Conscripted women with medical or certain other specialized training. [redacted]

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Soviet efforts to maintain the armed services at its current size would compound civilian labor problems. The civilian labor force, after increasing by an average of 2 million new workers per year during the 1970s, is projected to rise by less than 1 million per year during 1986-90. In addition, almost all of this expansion will be among non-Slavic minorities in Central Asia, predominantly rural peoples with below-average educational levels, weak Russian language skills, and a traditional resistance to relocate for employment purposes. Little or no labor force growth is expected in the USSR's western industrial heartland or among urban Slavs.

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Indeed, this problem has become all the more acute in the face of Gorbachev's modernization program with its emphasis on new equipment that will require a more highly skilled labor force. The increasingly stringent conscription policies the military has implemented have added to the pressures on the labor pool. In fact, in his speech to the party plenum in June, Gorbachev stated that industry was already short 700,000 workers. As a result, the Soviet political leadership has probably become dissatisfied with the military's efforts to claim what in effect is an increasing proportion of a shrinking pool. Under such circumstances, even if cutbacks have not yet been specifically ordered, the military would have to find ways to accommodate a reduction in manpower.

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Accommodating Manpower Reductions

Several options are available if the Soviets decide to reduce military manpower. A straightforward demobilization of existing personnel before the expiration of their service terms would augment the civilian work force on a one-time basis. Alternatively, reduction of the number of men drafted annually--currently about 2.2 million--would bring down force levels through attrition as men ending their service are not replaced, and would expand the labor force on an ongoing basis. Either approach would have to involve substantial cutbacks to have a significant impact on the overall size of the Soviet labor force which now numbers over 150 million. The Soviets might also combine initial demobilization with reduced conscription rates, providing a one-time boost in labor availability with smaller follow-on increments. Finally, the Soviets could increase the role of women in auxiliary support positions, but the military leadership would almost certainly not allow them in combat or combat support units where they would be needed most. In any case, drafting women--whose labor force participation rate is close to 90 percent--would exacerbate the labor shortage.

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Even if large troop reductions were to occur, Moscow would still face the problem of ensuring that the resulting increases in the civilian labor force took place in regions facing the greatest labor shortage. This might require selectively reducing draft calls from labor-deficit areas in the western USSR while continuing existing stringent practices in tapping the conscript pool from Central Asia and other surplus areas. Such an approach probably would face opposition from the military leadership, which traditionally has regarded Central Asians--because of their limited technical and Russian language skills--as suitable primarily for support functions, such as construction

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troops, rather than service in combat units. Moreover, it would require lowering the proportion of Slavic personnel--thought by the overwhelmingly Russian officer corps to be more competent--in combat units. It could also exacerbate ethnic tensions both within and outside the military by opening the regime to criticism for pursuing discriminatory policies for the benefit of the Slavic majority. []

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Military Implications

Despite their advantages, force reductions would involve difficult military choices. Of the 5.5 million men in the armed forces, some 1.2 million are noncombat service troops--construction, railroad, internal security, and civil defense troops--that would not be counted in the US definition of national security forces. Concentrating a large reduction in these forces, such as construction and railroad troops, might prove self-defeating. Such units provide substantial support services for the civilian economy and are used particularly in areas where it difficult to attract civilian workers. The Baikal-Amur Railroad in eastern Siberia, for example, is being built principally by conscripts serving in the railroad troops. The men released from such service meanwhile would be disproportionately Central Asians and similar minorities, who probably would return to their labor-surplus places of origin. []

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On the other hand, a 15- to 20-percent reduction in the remaining 4.3 million troops [] would drastically reduce readiness throughout the Soviet armed forces. If the Soviets concentrated a half-million-man reduction in the ground forces, which have 1.8 million men, manning would be cut by almost 30 percent and a large number of units might have to be eliminated from the force. []

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Such a cut would oblige the Soviets to make hard choices. Slightly over half a million Soviet troops are stationed in Central Europe, and another half million men are opposite China. Manning reductions of 30 percent in these areas--opposite what the Soviets see as dangerous adversaries--would eliminate the Soviets' capability to mount offensive operations there without months of preparation. The Soviets might even see such weakened forces as unable to guarantee credible defensive operations. Alternatively, large cuts in the already poorly manned units in the Soviet interior could lead to the disbanding of most of the force structure the Soviets plan to mobilize in a major war, and would take months to reconstitute. For these reasons, large cuts in the ground forces seem unlikely. []

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Even a smaller reduction could result in decreases in readiness. For example, a reduction of only [] about 5 percent--could require reducing many ready divisions to cadre strength, large reductions in support units, or some combination of these steps, if it were taken entirely in the ground forces. It is likely, therefore, that even this level of reduction would not be absorbed entirely by the ground forces and support services, but would affect the other branches of the armed forces as well, probably causing some reduction in readiness of all components except, perhaps, the strategic offensive forces. []

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Large reductions in force structure and organization--as opposed to manning cuts in existing units--would also lower military manpower requirements, but would be a major reversal of strategic thinking and developmental trends in the general purpose forces during the past 15 years. The large structural reductions in the ground forces made by Khrushchev in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, were justified by a Soviet judgment that war with NATO would be nuclear virtually from its outset and that large concentrations of conventional firepower were, therefore, unnecessary. []

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More recently, senior Soviet military officials including former Chief of Staff Ogarkov have asserted that a war with the West is increasingly likely to remain conventional, thus restoring the justification of mass and staying power embodied in large standing general purpose forces. This conclusion apparently has been a major cause for the expansion of the ground forces since the early 1970s by a gradual increase in the number, type, and internal structure of combat and support units. With their growing appreciation for the need of a large force structure--which could be fleshed out by reservists in an emergency--we doubt that any reductions the Soviets might announce would result in a major reduction in the size of the general purpose force structure. Severe reductions in manpower, even if leaving the structure intact, would make the force incapable of any large-scale operations--even defensive operations--without large-scale mobilization. []

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Furthermore, any reduction in Soviet military manpower is likely to complicate Moscow's management of its alliance relations. Most East European members of the Warsaw Pact are also facing adverse demographic trends and would welcome a chance to make manpower cuts of their own []

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[] The Soviets, however, have consistently resisted East European moves to reduce their armed forces. In the sixties, for example, despite their own force cuts, the Soviets successfully induced the East Europeans to build up their own forces and to take on important operations in the event of war with NATO. More recently, the Soviets tried to shelter the forces of some of their allies from large troop cuts in the MBFR forum while steadily pressing the East Europeans to slowly modernize and expand their forces to keep pace with changes in Soviet operational thinking. Finally, only last June, Soviet Marshal Kulikov, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pact's Combined Armed Forces, reportedly insisted that no reductions could be made in member armies despite Soviet public calls for arms control. []

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Plausible Gambits

Although we do not rule out large cuts over a short period, they are less likely because of their impact on readiness and force structure. Smaller cuts over time--perhaps numbering as many as a few hundred thousand troops--are plausible and could be carried out without seriously undermining Soviet national security. For example, the Soviets could withdraw and reduce a few divisions in Central Europe and several opposite China, eliminate some service support and construction units in the interior, and reduce manpower in some of their aging air defense missile units and surface naval units. []

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In the short term, Gorbachev could possibly announce even smaller cuts--on the order of several tens of thousands--hoping to reap maximum political benefit both at home and abroad. To play to the international audience, he could, for example, reduce and withdraw one or two divisions from Soviet forces in Eastern Europe and/or one or two divisions in Mongolia. Withdrawal and reduction of a large unit such as a division (about 10,000 men) would be highly visible, and Gorbachev would claim it could be verified by the West. He might even invite Western observers--perhaps sympathetic European journalists--to "cover" the withdrawal ceremonies. Such a token withdrawal would place the United States and its allies on the defensive without harming Soviet strength or regional security. With major elections scheduled soon in Great Britain and West Germany, leaders of these nations might feel forced to respond to such an initiative. Withdrawals opposite China would begin to meet one of the political "obstacles" the Chinese claim is impeding normalization of relations. []

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An announcement of large cuts, though unlikely, would have a dramatic political impact on several fronts. Such cuts would capture West European interests across the political spectrum. The United States' staunchest allies would come under strong domestic pressure to lean on Washington to reciprocate--at least in the form of "grand" arms control proposals. The numerous Soviet arms control offers of recent months--together with the existing imbalance of forces in Central Europe--have fostered some cynicism in Western Europe about Soviet machinations. Any pressure exerted by the allies on Washington, moreover, probably would be tempered by a wait-and-see attitude. In any event, the Soviets would strive to intensify the impact in Western Europe with a simultaneous propaganda campaign playing on "pan European" interests and Washington's alleged disregard of them. The Soviets probably would calculate that their proposal would stiffen opposition in West European capitals to the expensive US inspired conventional force modernization programs in NATO. []

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The East European regimes probably would view any massive cutbacks with mixed emotions. Each would argue for a share of the cuts for their own forces to relieve their beleaguered economies. While they would welcome small cuts of Soviet troops stationed in Eastern Europe, they probably would resist large cuts as domestically destabilizing. []

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USSR: Possible Military Manpower Cuts

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